

THE BARRIER FORTS

A Battle, A Monument, and A Mythical Marine

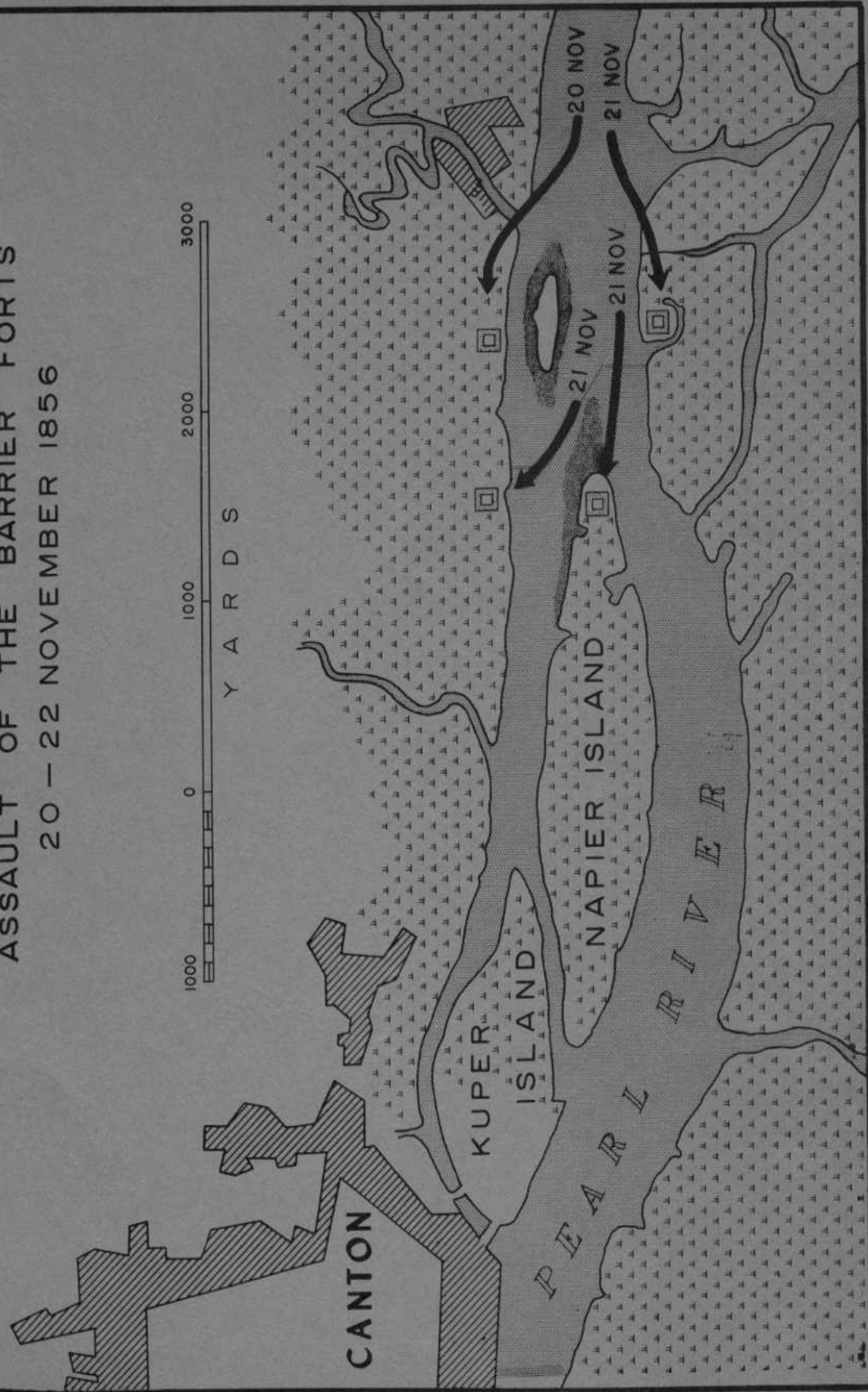


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ASSAULT OF THE BARRIER FORTS
20 - 22 NOVEMBER 1856





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A MONUMENT, AND A MYTHICAL MARINE

By

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Hung Hsiu-ch'uan had failed his examination for a post in the Chinese Imperial civil service. Today, in a Western nation, such a failure might easily be shrugged off, but for Hung it meant disaster. Unable to work for the emperor, doomed to struggle through life as an impoverished schoolmaster, he suffered a nervous breakdown. During this illness visions appeared to him. Interpreted in the light of some Christian tracts that he had been reading, these dreams convinced Hung that he was destined to end paganism in China. From his zealous preaching sprang the T'ai P'ing ("Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace") rebellion, a bloody religious war which would claim millions of victims between 1848 and 1864.

As if rebellion were not enough, the Chinese Empire soon found itself at odds with France and Britain. Opium was the cause of the conflict, as the Chinese attempted to halt British traffic in the drug. From the head of the house of Manchu to the lowliest peasant, every Chinese scorned the Westerners and hated their "inferior" customs. Naturally there were numerous clashes between Chinese and foreigners. Early in February 1856 a French missionary was condemned to death by a Chinese court, clearly a case of legalized murder. In October of the same year, the Chinese crew of a small British vessel was arbitrarily

arrested and jailed in defiance of the British flag. Both European nations now were determined to punish China as soon as they could muster enough troops. In the meantime their naval vessels began sporadic combat operations along the China coast, operations which later became known as the Second Opium War.⁽¹⁾

In Canton, one of the five ports in which Westerners were allowed to trade, antiforeign feeling was running high. Because of the perverted Christianity of Hung's militant disciples, missionaries were looked upon as spies. Traders also were despised; for the merchant, even if he did not stoop to traffic in opium, was engaged in what the Chinese ruling classes considered to be among the basest of human activities. From this seething caldron of hatred, the American Consul at Canton called out for protection to Commander Andrew H. Foote of the 22-gun sloop Portsmouth then lying eight miles down the Pearl River at Whampoa.

Early in the morning of 23 October 1856, 5 officers and 78 men, among them Second Lieutenant William W. Kirkland and his 18 Marines, rowed briskly ashore. This little force was organized into companies and posted on the housetops and in some newly constructed fortifications around the American compound in the city. They seemed too few for the job at hand. The 20-gun Levant, another sloop, dropped anchor at Whampoa on 27 October and added her approximately score of Marines, under Second Lieutenant Henry B. Tyler, and a detachment of sailors to the force already ashore. These sentinels exchanged shots with Chinese soldiers on 3 November but no one was hurt. Captain James

Armstrong, flying the flag of Commodore, East India Squadron, in the 13-gun steam warship, San Jacinto, arrived from Shanghai on 12 November to assume responsibility for the protection of American nationals at Canton. Two days later he dispatched Brevet Captain John D. Simms and 28 Marines to the turbulent city. Simms was placed in command of the entire force including bluejackets.

Sustaining a garrison, even a small one, at Canton was a difficult job. From the diplomatic point of view, the presence of an American force in the midst of a fast-developing war could be taken as an insult by the sensitive Chinese. From a military standpoint, things were no better. Canton was located at the apex of a sprawling delta. Guarding the tortuous ship channel up the Pearl River were four forts located midway between the squadron's anchorage at Whampoa and the city of Canton, each of them incorporating the latest recommendations of European military engineers. Both Foote and Armstrong were keenly aware of the problem posed by the forts. To supply a garrison in the face of Chinese opposition would entail either running the forts or trying to slip past them in small boats at night. Either choice might involve the Americans in what was in reality an Anglo-French quarrel with the Chinese.

A decision on the part of Chinese officials to guarantee the safety of American interests at Canton brought a temporary respite for Captain Armstrong. Gladly he withdrew the bulk of the landing force, leaving only a handful of Marines at the American compound. In place of direct action, Armstrong devised

an interim plan whereby the San Jacinto and Portsmouth would wait downstream while the Levant would hover off Canton in case the lives of the Americans in the city should be threatened. But events were to intervene before this plan could be put into effect. (2)

Whatever the intention of the Chinese in charge, they could not stem the rising tide of hatred. On 15 November, the day that the assurance of protection had been made, in fact, while Foote was in process of bringing the landing force back to Whampoa, the largest of the Chinese forts fired on the American boats. Next morning an unarmed boat from the San Jacinto ventured to within half a mile of the fort farthest downstream. Captain Armstrong had dispatched the fragile craft to sound out a channel in case it became necessary to dash upstream. Without warning, one of the forts opened fire with both round shot and grape. The first volley screamed over the men crouched in the boat. Again the Chinese cannon roared in hate. Grape harmlessly churned the muddy water astern; but a shot crashed into the boat, killing the coxswain. A third salvo fell short. (3)

Outraged at what seemed to be a deliberate breach of faith, both Foote and Armstrong decided to avenge this insult to the American flag. The more cautious of the pair was the squadron commander, Captain Armstrong. He hoped to cow the Chinese by engaging these so-called "Barrier Forts" with the guns of his ships. Since the San Jacinto drew too much water to steam farther upstream, Armstrong transferred his flag to the Portsmouth; and at 1500 on the afternoon of 16 November he ordered the expedition to get underway. A pair of small American merchant

steamships, the Kumfa and the Willamette, battled the swift current to tow the sloops within range. The Levant, however, ran aground before her guns could be brought into play. The Portsmouth continued alone. At 1530, the Chinese unleashed their first salvo, and the Americans replied. As long as there was enough daylight to aim, cannoners blazed away. Although several shots pierced the Portsmouth's hull, while grape played havoc with her rigging, her only casualty was one Marine seriously wounded. In all, the vessel had fired 230 shells plus grape shot during the engagement.⁽⁴⁾

A three-day lull followed as the Americans refloated the Levant and repaired minor damage to the Portsmouth. Armstrong began negotiations with the Chinese but before he had accomplished anything his health broke down, and he turned command of the expedition over to the daring Foote. Before returning to the San Jacinto, however, the captain advised Foote to withhold his fire unless the Chinese should attack.

Once Armstrong had left, the junior officer took stock of the situation. Facing him were four massive granite fortifications with walls seven feet thick. A total of 176 guns, some of them of ten-inch caliber, could be brought to bear against an attacking fleet. In addition, there were rumored to be between five thousand and fifteen thousand Chinese troops in the Canton area. Although the forts were powerful, the strongest in the Empire, Foote had no need to fear this poorly equipped, half-trained rabble. When Armstrong on 19 November ordered Foote to take any action necessary to forestall a Chinese attack, the commander decided to seize and level their works.⁽⁵⁾

Abandoning the idea of passive defense, the Americans now planned to head off a major battle by striking first; and on the morning of 20 November the Portsmouth and Levant went into action against two of the forts. Under cover of the ships' guns, a storming party of 287 officers and men, led by Foote himself, landed unopposed. Spearheading this force were the squadron's Marines, approximately 50 in number, under Captain Simms and a small detachment of sailors. Because of the terrain and the sheer walls of the first fort, the Americans had to assault from the rear. A village in which a handful of Chinese snipers had been posted loomed in their path, but the Marines quickly cleared the place and began the final sprint toward the redoubt. The defenders bolted; some of them even tried to swim the river. From the captured parapet, a hail of American bullets cut into the fleeing horde. Some 40 to 50 Chinese were killed.

At Canton, four miles distant, lay the main body of the Chinese force. No sooner had the stampeded garrison reached the city than an expedition got underway to recapture the first fort. While the fresh Chinese troops were approaching, Simms and his Marines had returned to the village just outside the walls to scatter a band of die-hards who had rallied there. A brisk volley and a fierce charge sent the enemy wallowing toward safety in the rice paddies. The Marines followed until the going got too difficult, paused to regroup, and began falling back. Suddenly the battered Chinese, their spirits revived by the coming of reinforcements, turned tiger and launched a counterattack.

Well over a thousand men swarmed through the ooze of the rice paddies to engulf the Leathernecks. Simms had his men hold their fire until the Chinese were within two hundred yards. Volley after volley thudded into enemy ranks. Gamely the Chinese stood their ground and returned the fire; but Marine marksmanship proved too accurate, and the enemy ran. Two other counterattacks were attempted, but both were beaten back by Leatherneck muskets and boat howitzers. (6)

Scheduled for assault the following day was the second of the Barrier Forts. Early that morning, the Marines and sailors of the landing force embarked in boats and, towed by the steam tug Kumfa, began moving upstream toward the objective. American guns lashed out above them in support of the landing. The three works still in Chinese hands divided their fire between the pair of sloops and the line of boats. A 68-pound shot knifed through one of the American boats killing three and wounding five. Yet the enemy's fire, though frightening in volume, was for the most part inaccurate. Once ashore, Simms led his men across a creek waist-deep with murky water and over the granite walls. While a force of a thousand Chinese hovered just out of range of the tiny American howitzers, Corporal William McDougal of the Levant planted the Stars and Stripes on the parapet. (7)

Once the fort had fallen, Foote ordered Sims to clear the Chinese from the river bank so that his boats would not be caught in a crossfire during the next phase of the operation, an attack upon the fort on Napier Island. Hugging an embankment the Leathernecks were moving cautiously forward when

they collided with a Chinese battery of seven guns. Caught completely by surprise, the enemy fled amid a fusillade of musket fire. Leaving a handful of men to destroy the guns and protect his rear, Simms moved his force to the top of the embankment and opened fire across the water to silence the third of the Chinese works. Once the guns of the island fortress had been stilled, Simms and his Marines withdrew along the embankment to join in Foote's next assault.⁽⁸⁾

This third fort fell quickly to the American assault force. Fire from the two captured citadels and from the shoreline opposite blanketed the works in a shroud of dust and smoke. Once again, Corporal McDougal broke out the American flag as the assault wave surged over the walls. On the second day of the operation, 21 November, two forts and a Chinese battery had been taken. All that remained was to capture and destroy the last of the works, Center Fort, on the Canton side of the river.

Preparations for this final phase began in the darkness of the following morning. All captured artillery pieces which could not be used to support the attack had been torn from their mounts and spiked, but the best of the Chinese weapons were aimed at the squat heap of granite that was Center Fort. The sky was barely light when an American howitzer snarled across the water. The enemy did not reply. Again the cannon-eers tried to draw Chinese fire but there was no answer. Then three waves of boats crawled out from the island toward the final objective. The howitzers and captured cannon roared in support of the assault waves, but Center Fort remained quiet.

All three lines of bobbing boats were well within range when the Chinese at last cut loose. Clouds of grapeshot whined across the river as men of the assault force leaped into waist deep water and began wading toward the base of the walls. Once they had clambered to the parapet, they found that the enemy had fled. A crude sort of booby trap, a cannon loaded and aimed at the boats, had been left behind by the defenders, but alert Marines quickly snuffed out the smoldering powder train.⁽⁹⁾

Since Foote's squadron now was in complete control of the barrier fortifications, the work of destruction could begin in earnest. Those guns which had been spared to assist the final assault were uprooted and spiked. The ruined pieces then were rolled into the water. Demolition parties moved from fort to fort planting charges of gun powder beneath the mighty walls. On 5 December, a spark believed caused when someone's crowbar glanced off the granite touched off the powder being placed beneath the walls of Center Fort. The blast killed three men outright and wounded nine others. On the following day, the two sloops moved downstream to their normal anchorage at Whampoa; behind them the most formidable works in the Chinese Empire lay in ruins.⁽¹⁰⁾

In one brief but furious campaign, Commander Foote's command had captured four powerful redoubts, killed an estimated five hundred Chinese, and routed an army of thousands--all at the cost of 7 killed in action, 3 killed during the demolition of Center Fort, and a total of 32 wounded or injured. None of the Marines were killed in the fighting; but one, Private William

Cuddy, took sick and died, while six others were wounded. Three days of the fiercest action proved that ships, when teamed with a strong landing force, could indeed fight forts.⁽¹¹⁾

Besides being a truly remarkable feat of arms, the destruction of the Barrier Forts appeared to be a diplomatic success. An apology for the unprovoked attack of 16 November on the sounding boat was quick in coming. Foote had avenged an insult to the American flag and made certain that the Chinese at Canton would behave in the future.

The men of the East India Squadron were justly proud of their achievement. To commemorate their comrades killed at Canton, they raised a thousand dollars to erect some sort of monument. Nothing, however, was done until Foote, detached from the Portsmouth, arrived at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in October 1858. As Executive Officer of the Yard, he was able to begin work on the monument. The site selected was just inside the Sand Street Gate. Under the hand of a local sculptor, a marble shaft surmounted by an eagle gradually took shape. At its base was a tablet listing the names of those who fell in the attack.

When it was dedicated late in 1858, the marker listed 12 names: E. C. Mullens, Louis Hetzell, Thomas Craus, James Hoagland, Wm. Mackin, Alfred Turner, Edward Riley, Joseph Gibbings, Edward Hughes, Charles Ream, Thomas McCann, and "John McBride-- Corporal Marines." Unfortunately, there were errors on this roll of honor. The names of Lewis Hetzel and Thomas Krouse had suffered at the hands of the stone cutter. Worse yet,

there was no sailor named Thomas McCann killed at Canton; nor was any Marine killed during the battle. Who, then, was John McBride? None of the Marine detachments involved in the action carried anyone by that name on their muster rolls. Eager to finish the task, the impetuous Foote apparently had not taken time to check official records. Like Thomas McCann, McBride was the result of a lapse of memory.⁽¹²⁾

Captain Armstrong, Commander Foote, and Brigadier General Commandant Archibald Henderson all had hailed the exploits of the sailors and Marines of the East India Squadron. The Secretary of the Navy in his Annual Report for 1857 had devoted an entire paragraph to the Battle of the Barrier Forts. It is ironic indeed that the memorial to Foote's gallant dead, a work which he himself began, should contain not only misspellings but the names of a phantom sailor and a mythical Marine.

NOTES

- (1) "China," Encyclopedia Britannica, 1944, v. 5, pp. 536-537; William L. Langer, An Encyclopedia of World History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 879.
- (2) Foote to Armstrong, 4 Nov 1856, East India Squadron Letters, 1855-1856, National Archives; Clyde H. Metcalf, History of the U. S. Marine Corps (New York: Putnam, 1939), pp. 172-173; H. A. Ellsworth, One Hundred Eighty Landings of U. S. Marines (Washington: Historical Section, HQMC, 1934), pp. 24-25; Charles O. Paullin, "Early Voyages of American Naval Vessels to the Orient," U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings, v. 37, no. 2 (Jun 1911), pp. 391-396.
- (3) Typed extracts, log of San Jacinto, 16 Nov 1856, Archives, HQMC.
- (4) Typed extracts, log of Portsmouth, 16 Nov 1856, Archives, HQMC.
- (5) Foote to Armstrong, 26 Nov 1856, East India Squadron Letters.
- (6) Ibid.; Sims to CMC, 7 Dec 1856, Historical File, Marine Corps, National Archives.
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) Simms to CMC, 7 Dec 1856.
- (9) Foote to Armstrong, 26 Nov 1856.
- (10) Typed extracts, log of the Portsmouth; Foote to Armstrong, 5 Dec 1856, East India Squadron Letters.
- (11) The Marine casualties were Corporals William Boyce and James Linus and Privates Joseph McNeil, Patrick Mahon, Patrick Melvin, and John G. Thompson.
- (12) Edwin N. McClellan, "The Capture of the Barrier Forts in the Canton River, China," Marine Corps Gazette, v. 5, no. 3 (Sep 1920), p. 272; James M. Hoppin, Life of Andrew Hull Foote (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), p. 140n.